

Farming practices that have been sound and sustainable in Florida's past may be extremely valuable to gardeners in the present and future. One such practice is cover cropping between vegetable crops instead of letting land lay fallow. Older farmers who have experience in cover cropping in your area have valuable information that is worth seeking out.

The term 'green manure' refers to a cover crop that is grown on the site and then tilled in while still alive. Plants that work well as green manure must grow rapidly, produce lush and abundant top growth and grow well in the specific site conditions. Annual plants are normally used because they will grow quickly so there will still be time to till and let the material rot before planting the next crop of garden vegetables.

The garden soil benefits in many ways from the addition of this organic material (that which was once alive) between growing your vegetable crops. As a 'catch crop', these temporary cover plants take up nutrients that remain in the soil following harvest before they can leach away. When the green manure decomposes in the soil, those nutrients are made available to the new garden crop.

As any gardener knows, our sandy soil does not retain water or nutrients. Adding organic material will increase the soil's ability to hold water and nutrients for plant use. Organic material also increases soil fertility and tilth. While it is growing, the cover crop protects the garden from soil loss due to wind and water erosion. When legumes are appropriate to use, available nitrogen is actually increased for the next vegetable crop due to the activity of nitrogen-fixing bacteria living in root nodules.

Winter annual cover crops that can be planted now through mid-November to suppress nematode and weed populations include pearl millet, cereal rye, hairy vetch and wheat. These benefits are in addition to those mentioned earlier. These particular cover crops mature in 2 to 3 months, so there's plenty of time for them to grow, be incorporated into soil, and partially decompose before most vegetables are planted.

For more information, contact the Master Gardeners at 752-5384 or read the UF/IFAS publication 'Cover Crops' at <http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/aa217> *(Published 9-23-12)*